

Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams

A paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies annual meeting, Dallas Texas, 1996. First and abbreviated version of an article for an anthology by Jon Lewis on New Hollywood for Duke Univ. Press. Will also be elaborated in a different context for **American Experiments**, a work-in progress on US independent film/video.

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This paper is part of a longer work. The major questions I raise in the longer work that apply here are: Is it possible to create a cultural alternative to the dominant system: a counterculture? an oppositional culture? a revolutionary culture? While I don't believe it is possible in the long term without a social-political movement working in tandem with a cultural movement, and certainly not as a substitute for it, it is sometimes the case that cultural developments are in advance of social and political developments (ref. Lenin, Mao). And, if the answer to the question is a contingent 'yes' under what conditions and with what results?

1. Critical investment

The low budget independent feature film (most of which are dramatic fictional narratives, although some are theatrical documentaries such as *Roger and Me* and *Hoop Dreams*) has been a consistent, albeit marginal part of the American cinema since the late 1950s. Occupying an economic and aesthetic position at the edge of the mainstream commercial cinema, its border also edges toward exploitation and pornography genres and aesthetically toward the European art film and the experimental avant garde. To use a contemporary shorthand, we

can refer to them as the Sundance Films, or the Independent Feature Project Films, or Off-Hollywood films.

These are the kinds of films that members of the Society for Cinema Studies often like to watch (at their local art house) or book for class, or, in small college towns like Carbondale, Illinois, rent-by-mail from Facets Multimedia so they can overcome the cultural deprivation of the heartland. They are films like *Art for Teachers of Children*, *The Devil Never Sleeps*, *Clean, Shaven*, or *Safe* that were shown at the SCS annual meeting in 1996. They are films which some members give papers on: *Clerks*, *Hoop Dreams*, *Liquid Sky*, *Speaking Parts*, *Household Saints*, and (arguably) *Pulp Fiction*. And, most significantly for those of us here today, they are the films we like to teach and often (implicitly or explicitly) hold up as models for our aspiring students who want to make films. Or that we ourselves might even daydream about making. [Aside: Can I have a show of hands from everyone in the room who has written at least one script for a dramatic feature film? (Pause) Well, some of you are too modest!] We are, after all, the ones who teach the legendary story of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics becoming the French New Wave. We are the ones who discuss Orson Welles' career in Hollywood as a tragedy. We are the ones who are most attracted to legends of auteurs who succeed on their own terms within the system such as Robert Altman, John Cassavetes, Woody Allen, or Spike Lee.

I don't want to ridicule this desire, for it is grounded in what almost all of us validate and want to inspire our students to strive for: the artistically accomplished dramatic feature which speaks to (and sometimes with, and sometimes for) an audience that wants entertainment and enlightenment through a film that seems to express an artist's vision. These are the films that we validate in our roles as critics, scholars, teachers, journalists, curators, preservationists, and intellectuals. And this is no small thing: we are, after all, people who by and large have traded the possibility of considerable material wealth and high income for the

opportunity to evaluate--to sit in judgment on--media culture in both historical and aesthetic terms. We don't have any influence on box office success, but we are the ones who construct the canon of works, write the histories, argue the moral, social, and artistic value of those films produced. For example: Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* is in the National Registry of Film Preservation because of us.¹ And Oscar Micheaux's work is receiving the re-evaluation it deserves because of SCS members.

The concern for low budget independent films has been a vital part of identity and constituency political developments in film studies: feminists gay/lesbian/queer, African American, Latino, Asian American, and other critics and scholars have all focused attention on significant feature length films and created the context of intellectual discussion necessary for coalescing and developing an ongoing audience awareness as well as a critical discourse among makers, exhibitors, critics and the public. The prime example would be Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied*, which not only spoke from, for, and to a black gay male experience, but also in fact helped bring such an identify and politics into being. At times some such films occupy an importance within critical discourse far out of proportion to their actual aesthetic or political value: for example, *She Must Be Seeing Things* was vastly overregarded by some lesbian-feminist critics simply because it was the first narrative feature of its kind and thus allowed certain critical and political issues to be discussed. Today, with more lesbian dramatic features in existence, the breakthrough film seems pale by comparison. *Born in Flames* provides a similar case.

However, the considerable intellectual (and emotional) investment that we have in these films should not blind us to some *other* investments that people have--and I mean financial

¹Full disclosure: I gave the first SCS paper on Burnett's film. "Charles Burnett's KILLER OF SHEEP," Society for Cinema Studies, UCLA, June 1982, on a panel I organized: "Independent Black, Chicano, and Asian Filmmaking in Los Angeles." The Society as a whole was instrumental in establishing the Registry, along with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and other industry and library interests.

monetary investments that people--individuals and corporations-- make in order to make money in the film industry. In other words, our personal libidinal and social economy must be balanced in analysis with a political economy.

2. Defining independence.

[insert short history: existence and function of B film in 30s and 40s; development of independents in 50s; relation to exploitation film; relation to teen market film in 60s and 70s; changing structure of distribution/exhibition.]

Dreams of *independence*, dreams by *independents* are often the stuff of fantasy and illusion because no matter how low-budget one goes in production, it is the dominant capitalist system which defines the basic structures. One of the most enduring structures of the present is the basic economic truth that for Hollywood, *money is made on hits*. Since the breakup of the vertically integrated studio system after WW2, people who finance film production are playing a speculative game of producing a number of films, many of which will fail to make back their costs, in hopes that one will become the megahit.² But, of course, this is well known and frequently commented on when looking at mainstream product. What is seldom discussed is the implication for low budget features.

Some numbers. The major studios released 212 movies in 1995. John Pierson estimates that about 400 independent features are produced every year. Now that's an arguable figure because it includes not just extreme low budget films by new screenwriters and directors, but also carefully crafted features for cable and direct-to-video which are made with union crews

²The actual situation is not a pure dichotomy of flop or hit, because foreign distribution forms an increasingly important ancillary market (especially in certain genres such as action adventure), as well as the swelling cable market, and because of video cassette distribution providing post-theatrical income.

and which are relatively low risk bets (examples would be John Dahl's *Red Rock West*, or *The Last Seduction*, or Zalman King's and other erotic thrillers), because they can be calculated to be easily sold or even pre-sold and as cable or direct-to-video niche genres, they require virtually no promotion and advertising budget. So, even discounting those parts of the low budget independent market, we still have about 200 films every year that compete for attention in the Independent Feature Film Market (the annual fall showcase in New York for completed and in-progress work) and for festival slots at Sundance, Telluride, New York, Toronto, San Francisco, and other major festivals which are important venues for independent work. Some of these films do get festival screenings but do not get distribution deals. Some get distribution deals but do not succeed at the box office.

Essentially, Hollywood--the dominant capitalist film entertainment system--has increasingly come to use the low budget independent films as an inexpensive, low risk source for an increasingly differentiated market, and as a kind of minor league training ground for new talent who, if they succeed, will then be brought into the majors. Rather than investing its own money in production, the industry sponsors a highly speculative system in which about 200 independents a year are winnowed down to about 10 a year which are profitable or at least come close to returning their investment.

[Insert here: detailed discussion of the actual economics.

1. production costs--measured as actual out of pocket expenses; indies work on deferred salary

This has been much hyped, which makes for good copy but is woefully inadequate for analysis

2. full costs, represent bringing a film to completion: 16mm-35mm, cost of opticals, remixing sound including foley, payment for music rights

3. Prints

4. Promotion and advertising. Hollywood standard: \$8-14 million for advertising.

importance of promotion (e.g. *Entertainment Tonight*, *People*, etc.)

5. Distribution

6. Exhibition

7. Residual sales: Europe and other foreign films

cable tv

video cassette]

The start up risk takes place off-Hollywood. But this is only part of the story, because the changing conditions of exhibition are even more important in this sector.

[elaborate exhibition]

3. Major lessons of independent low budget film

1. Low budget independent features do not make a huge net. [explain distribution/exhibition deals]. A gross of \$2-6 million (considered very good in this sector) can easily be eaten up by expenses and shares.

2. The net back to the original director/producer is almost never enough to finance production of another film. For the director it is at best the start of a track record to make another film (which is usually much more within the Hollywood system). Spike Lee is a good example: although moderately budgeted and generally successful, his films have had to seek funding from scratch each time out.

3. The films that are the most successful within this particular system tend to be those with a clearly marked niche market. For example, John Pierson characterized the audience for Julie

Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* as black women who read Toni Morrison novels,¹ and the marketing of the film carefully developed that audience. The film *Crumb* was a sure thing with the legion of the artist's fans, and then picked up some critical acclaim. And *Go Fish* and *The Incredible True Story of Two Girls in Love* were eagerly viewed by the unserved young lesbian market.

4. But when a niche is identified, Hollywood then steps in with its own vehicle: the success of independent gay features shows that you can sell *Philadelphia*. *Daughters of the Dust* demonstrates a market potential filled by *Waiting to Exhale*. And in almost every case, the Hollywood copycat is less imaginative, less political, and less interesting than the original. But, it then sets the terms for the continuation of the terms of that niche. So, while independents can initially gain a leg up through constituency markets, once identified, one must compete with the mainstream's attempt to exploit the same market. Thus the Gen X hit *Slackers* opens the space for the star-powered *Reality Bites*. And Richard Linkletter goes from the unpolished rawness of *Slackers* to *Dazed and Confused*,...nice enough as a teen comedy, but no more than that, and a good deal less than, say, *American Graffiti*.

Thus, the pressure of the market place is decisive in shaping the continuing work of independents. Thus any further analysis must recognize:

- some new directors are simply interested in making a calling card film to enter the mainstream and thus in using low budget as an alternative to (expensive) film school, When we reflect that going to USC, NYU or UCLA costs about \$120,000 for four years (plus costs of filmmaking), there is a certain logic for an 18 year old to simply hit up mom and dad for enough to make a feature.

- To continue to make auteur cinema within this system is increasingly tenuous. In the 80s NEA/NEH/AFI/ and foundation grants and co-productions with Channel 4 and German television helped out many aspiring filmmakers. Those days seem to be gone forever at present.
- while independents can initially gain a leg up through constituency markets, once identified, one must compete with the mainstream's attempt to exploit the same market. And this is matched by the observable fact that declaration of a constituency market may hurt the very institutions that initially created the phenomenon. For example, B. Ruby Rich's trumpeting of a New Queer Cinema of feature films in the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound* a few years ago had the effect of distributors and potential distributors telling filmmakers that they should *not* show their features at gay/lesbian/queer festivals because it would disrupt the marketing. So the identity festivals which created a market and demand and which had highlighted features in premiers, opening nights and festival closings and awards were cut off. And some filmmakers have betrayed their bad faith and bad politics by then arguing that they don't want to be 'ghettoized' in such festivals which gave them their first recognition and encouragement.
- the alternative distributors are not really so independent. New Line is owned by Turner Broadcasting which is now owned by Time Warner. Miramax is currently carrying 50 some independent features in initial release or some stage of pre-release which means they have more product under their control than some studios release in a year. Miramax is a subsidiary of Disney Corporation.

conclusion

As teachers we already serve an important function of studying, discussing, contextualizing these films--of creating a broader dialogue about them and their historical antecedents. We shouldn't be naive about the actual constraints on independent film. But we shouldn't be cynical or despairing about it either.

Being a radical, being political, calls upon us to work within, around, and in spite of the existing system. It calls upon us to be aware of the contradictions so that we might, under a certain confluence of events or constellation of factors be able to take advantage of them.